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Country Profile

Introduction

Somalia occupies a significant geo-political position between sub-Saharan Africa, the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, and southwestern Asia. The population of Somalia is estimated to be about eight million¹; however, the last official census was in 1975 and actual numbers have fluctuated dramatically. Nomadic lifestyles and refugee migration in recent years make it difficult to obtain accurate census data. Many native Somalis live in adjacent countries such as Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya.



© Charles Roffey
Nomad near Berbera

Most Somalis are Muslim. Half the population lives in nomadic tribes. Nomadic life fosters the idea of freedom without government, and the country's history, particularly recently, reflects this attitude.² Struggle for power by warlords, principally in the last two decades, forced over a million inhabitants to flee the country. The civil war destroyed Somalia's infrastructure and blocked most economic activities. The ensuing tragedy, in the form of economic chaos and famine, caused thousands of deaths and could only be stopped by the UN. Eventually, US forces became involved. The problems remain unresolved and the current situation in Somalia is precarious. Several regions, such as Somaliland and Puntland, have been declared independent states, but none of these has been officially recognized. Presently, Somalia has no central government. This area study will present a general overview of the region still referred to as Somalia by most of the world.

Geography

Somalia lies on and north of the equator in east Africa. The northern part of the country is mountainous, with elevations ranging from 300 to 2100m (984 ft to 6,890 ft) above sea level, with the highest point, the Surud Cad, reaching 2,480 m (7,900 ft).

The central and southern flatlands have an average elevation of close to 180 m (580 ft), and they gradually decrease in elevation southward toward the Indian Ocean. Further south, granite formations abound.³

There are two major rivers in Somalia, the Juba and the Shebelle, both originating in Ethiopia. The Shebelle joins the Juba before reaching the Indian Ocean near Kismaayo. The Dharoor and Nugaal Valleys both have impermanent rivers, the Daror and Nugaaleed, which flow toward the east, reaching the Indian Ocean at Xaafuun and Eyl, respectively.

¹ <http://www.britannica.com> (2003 est.)

² Ibid.

³ <http://www.birdlife.org/>

Area

Somalia is located in an area known as the Horn of Africa, on the eastern coast of the African continent. This is a strategic area situated along the southern approach to Bab el Mandeb⁴ and next to routes to the Red Sea and Suez Canal.⁵ In the northwest, the border with Djibouti runs about 60 kilometers (35 miles). The border with Ethiopia to the west, which is partially under dispute, stretches over 1,600 kilometers (980 miles). The border with Kenya, to the southwest, runs about 680 kilometers (422 miles).⁶



Somalia faces the Gulf of Aden in the north and the Indian Ocean in the east. It possesses the longest coastline of all African countries stretching over 2,720 km (1,700 miles). The total land area is 637,000 km² (246,000 square miles).⁷

Climate

Somalia lies on the equator and thus belongs to the tropics. Weather conditions range from arid in the northeast and central regions to semiarid in the northwest and south. Droughts often occur as precipitation is very limited. Annual rainfall is less than 10 cm (4 inches). The central plateau receives about 28 to 48 cm (15 to 20 in) of rain yearly, and the southern region receives about 60 cm (24 in) of rain annually. Most of the rain comes with the monsoon winds, which help to bring temperatures down. The mean annual temperature varies by location between 25° C and 28° C (77° F and 82° F).⁸ Along the eastern coastline, temperatures are slightly lower. In the northern mountainous region temperatures can drop to just above 0° C (32° F).

Four seasons are recognized in Somalia, two of them being rainy and two being dry. From December through March the main dry season (*jiilaal*) moderates temperatures in the north yet turns the south extremely hot, making this the harshest season. In April and June, the main rains (*gu*) bring milder weather, turning the desert green for a brief time. Then, from July through September, the lesser dry season (*hagaa*) is torrid in the northern region and excessively hot in the south; it is followed by the lesser rainy season (*dayr*) in October to December. In the Mogadishu area the sea breezes create continual mild conditions from May through October and from December through February. During the dry periods conditions are always hot and humid.⁹

History

The history of Somali people goes back thousands of years. The mostly nomadic tribes living in this area have not adhered to any borders. Instead, they roamed with their herds to find food, thus even today the notion of frontiers is not easily accepted by them.

⁴ The Bab el Mandab, sometimes referred to as the Mandab Strait, is the waterway that separates Asia from Africa and connects the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean.

⁵ <http://www.cia.gov/cia/>

⁶ <http://www.britannica.com>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <http://www.fao.org/forestry/>

⁹ Somalia-Climate, <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-37716>

The ancient Egyptians spoke of Somalia, one of their trading partners, as "God's Land" or the "Land of Punt," and called its inhabitants "Black Berbers." Somalia has always been mentioned as a primary source for frankincense and myrrh. These fragrant gum resins from indigenous trees are still one of Somalia's main export products.

During the Middle Ages Somalia struggled to survive attacks by Arab, Persian, and Ethiopian invaders, but in the end, the Ottomans and the Sultan of Zanzibar came out as winners. That is until the European colonialists arrived in the 19th century. Colonial powers from Europe became very interested in the region especially after the construction of the Suez Canal was completed in 1869. The Suez Canal secured direct access by ship from the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea and beyond towards South Asia.

The Somalis revolted against the British colonists, and by 1910 the British abandoned the inland areas and moved to the coast. The Italians took advantage of the situation, and through the Treaty of London in 1915 they acquired the newly freed inland areas. At the height of fascism in the 1930s, Italy consolidated Somaliland, Eritrea, and Ethiopia into the colonial state of Italian East Africa.

After WWII, Italy was forced to give up all of its colonial possessions. It took another ten years of UN-sponsored negotiations to reach a final decision about Somalia's future. Full independence was granted by the British on June 26, 1960, and the Italians followed suit on July 1. Thus July 1 became Independence Day for Somalia in remembrance of the nation's creation from the former British and Italian protectorates.

Border disputes with Kenya and Ethiopia erupted in hostilities by 1964. In 1967 Shermarke was elected president, but within two years he was assassinated in a coup by one of his bodyguards, opening the way for the army to take over power under the direction of Siad Barre. In 1970, Barre declared Somalia a socialist state, and in 1974 Somalia joined the Arab League. A literacy campaign created that same year established the first Somali writing system. Despite Barre's success in fighting illiteracy, economic problems remained. The situation worsened in the following years due to terrible droughts and consequent widespread starvation.



Courtesy of wikipedia.org
Siad Barre

Somali troops invaded and occupied the Somali-inhabited Ogaden area in 1977, but within a year they were pushed out by Soviet- and Cuban-aided Ethiopian forces. Opposition arose in 1981 after Barre ejected the Myjertin and Isaq clans from his government in favor of members from his own clan. Even after Barre signed a peace accord with Ethiopia in 1988, the opposition forced Barre out of the country in 1991.

The new government could not control the whole country as local clan-militias looked after their own interests. In May 1991, the Somali National Movement (SNM) proclaimed independence for the so-called Republic of Somaliland. In the Mogadishu

area, the Somali National Alliance (SNA) and the Somali Salvation Alliance (SSA) took up battle positions against Barre's supporters, who were represented by the Somali National Front (SNF). The war demolished the city of Mogadishu and halted food production in the hinterland. People in the southern part of the country faced starvation as warring factions interfered with all efforts by the UN to deliver food relief supplies.



DoD image
US Marines in Mogadishu, 1992

In 1992 the United States led a multinational UN coalition of 35,000 troops into the area. By March 1993, several peace treaties were signed by warring factions, but in June the situation became untenable. After having suffered an unacceptable number of casualties, foreign forces withdrew from the area by March 1994. The following years showed several attempts at negotiating peace, but the SNA and SSA continued their war against each other. Aid operations were halted completely after one of the war lords, Mohamed Aideed, took hostages and destroyed aid equipment in the town of Abidoo in 1994. Aideed died of a gunshot wound in 1996, and his son, Hussein Aideed, took over the command of the SNA.

A peace conference in Djibouti brought some hope for peace in Somalia in 2000, but the Transitional National Assembly that was formed then could never take power. Another attempt in 2002 yielded better results when plans for a transitional government were created. As a result Abdullah Yusuf Ahmed was elected president of the interim government in 2004, but his offices remain in Kenya as Mogadishu is still unsafe. The Prime Minister of the transitional government is Ali Muhammad Ghedi.

Economy

Livestock is the main source for hard currency as it is Somalia's main export. Sorghum and corn are the main harvests, but bananas, which are cultivated in the southern part of the country, are the country's second largest export item. Other export items are myrrh and, more famously, frankincense. These are extracted from the balsam and Boswellia trees growing in the semi-desert regions of northern Somalia.¹⁰

Despite anarchy, Somalia's service sector manages to survive and grow. Telecommunication firms provide wireless services in most major cities. In the absence of a formal banking sector, money exchange services have sprouted throughout the country, handling between \$200 million and \$500 million in remittances annually.

Cargo airlines operating from Hargeisa Airport import commodities coming mainly from Dubai; these goods sometimes simply transit to Ethiopia. The Arabian Peninsula is the main commercial importer of Somali goods, while most imports originate in Djibouti, Kenya, India, and Brazil. The port of Berbera handles 80 % of all the transactions in the country.

¹⁰ <http://www.airandwater.co.uk/>

An important element in Somali economy is *qat* (*khat*). The consumption of this herb, which acts as a stimulant when chewed, is widespread among Somali males. Nairobi airport ensures ten flights daily to import this narcotic, which depletes 30% of the consumer's income. Revenues from trafficking *qat* are used by many warlords to finance acquisitions of weapons.¹¹

Government and Politics of Somalia

The political situation in Somalia is uncertain. Without an effective government and with half the country partitioned into autonomous republics, there is no central governance. The breakaway republics have no legal representation outside their areas and are not recognized internationally. The transitional government, set up through international efforts and based in Kenya, has no effective control, as most of the country and major sections of Mogadishu are controlled by warlords. Many clan-based political groups have been formed and re-formed—even since the creation of the new transitional government. Interestingly, the president of Puntland was elected Prime Minister of the latest interim government, which still has a long way to go to become a de facto government of Somalia as a whole.

The Future

Somalia has undeveloped mineral deposits. Salt, sepiolite¹², limestone, gypsum-anhydrite, quartz, and large uranium and iron ore deposits show potential for the future development of a mining industry. Until now, Somalia's coastline—the longest of any country in Africa—has only been used to situate trade-ports that facilitate the exchange of goods with the Middle East and other East African countries. Tourism and fishing have great potential for the future, but have not been developed. Political decisions will have the largest influence on how Somalia becomes a country, or several countries, where foreign investments will see the potential in revitalizing the weakened Somali economy.



DoD image
Herding goats

¹¹ French Embassy in Kenya

¹² Sepiolite is a clay mineral that is used for oil drilling or carving ('meerschaum').

Religion

Introduction

In Somalia, the influence of religion on daily life is woven into nearly every fabric of human interaction. Ninety-nine percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, and about one percent is Christian¹³. In both urban and nomadic groups, Somali families teach verses from the Quran to their male children at an early age. Especially in nomadic tribes, teaching Islamic traditions is of profound importance and serves as a rite of passage for young boys. Very few communities, however, consider Quranic studies appropriate for girls.

The Role of Religion and Religious Laws in the Government

The moral, ethical, and legal ideas shaping the contours of religious law in Somalia have their primary origins in Islamic tradition. Most regions are governed by traditional and customary laws, which are heavily influenced by Islamic Sharia law, as there is no effective centralized Somali Government.



After Somalia's independence in 1960¹⁴, the distinctions between four unique legal systems shifted the way religious Sharia law functioned in the social milieu. For one, there was a move to consolidate English common law, Italian law, Islamic Sharia religious law, and Somali customary law, which involve traditions and sanctions. Sharia courts, in particular, became more responsible for civil matters, whereas the domain of religious law once covered only matters of land ownership and water rights. Governance became the purview of Somali customary law.

During the Siad Barre regime, a unified civil code limited authority and responsibility of both Sharia and Somali customary laws. Under this consolidation, the attorney general became responsible for both upholding the law and prosecuting criminal matters. Since the collapse of the Barre regime, no national judicial system has existed in Somalia. Religious Sharia laws and some traditional and customary laws and, to a limited extent, even the Barre Penal Code is used, or a combination of the three.

Sunni Sufism

Among Somalis, there is a strong tradition of *tariqa*, or religious orders associated with Sufism, a mystical element within Islam. *Tariqas* are social and religious brotherhoods that serve as centers of learning and religious leadership. The leaders of these *tariqas* are said to have *baraka*, a state of blessedness, suggesting a spiritual power that may be invoked at the tomb of a leader.

¹³ <http://countrystudies.us/somalia/44.htm>

¹⁴ <http://countrystudies.us/somalia/70.htm>

Islamic fundamentalists view *tariqas* as mere superstition; they oppose the idea of reverence or sainthood for their leaders. They also oppose secular government and advocate the introduction of Sharia law and strict Islamic dress for women. Traditional religious men, clan leaders, and elders, however, still have a larger following than the fundamentalists, although the influence of the latter is on the rise.

Exchange 1: Remember Sheik Abdul-Kadir

Somali (Sufi):	Do you seek blessing from Sheik Abdul-Kadir (saint)?	sheyKh 'abdul-kaadir ma ka doo'aaysataa?
Soldier:	No, thank you.	maaya, mahadsanid.
Somali (Sufi):	Okay!	waa tahaay.

Religious Sensitivity

Never, never, ever try to convert a Muslim to another faith. The best is to avoid the subject of religion if possible. Somalis will never ask about your religion because they assume that you're a Christian. One last bit of advice: atheism or agnosticism is not well accepted in the Muslim world.

Influence of Religion on the Interaction between Males and Females

After the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, the rise of Islamic influence on society resulted in a more conservative attitude towards women. Islamic laws are replacing Barre's Family Laws of 1976 in most parts of the country.



© Charles Roffey
Women at a market

This folktale about a Somali saint, Sheikh Awais, illustrates the influence of religion on men's behavior towards women in Somali society:¹⁵

"He once went to Brava district where the Bravani people [...] lived. So he left and stopped at a place about 5 km from Brava. Soon after his departure, some Bravani women realized that it was not only a discourtesy but a great mistake on the part of their men-folk not to welcome the great saint. So those women collected money, food and other articles for him, went in search of him and gave those articles to him with great respect. At this, Sheikh Awais gave them a blessing saying, "Your husbands will become your servants, you will rule them."

This dua (benediction) came true, and today we find the Bravani women do not go to the market to do any work or even to make purchases. They only cook, teach the Quran to their own children and make very beautiful and costly cofia (Somali national head dress for men) and they earn a lot of money.

¹⁵ <http://www.civicwebs.com/cwvlib>

On Jumma (Friday), the Bravani men put on the greys (sarees) of their wives and go to pray in their mosques. According to the tradition, if a Bravani man does not put on his wife's dress on Friday, his wife considers that he does not love her and so family conflict may start on this account. “

Religious Events

Festivities in Somalia are associated with religious, social, and/or seasonal events. Among religious festivals, many are connected to the three categories of saints recognized by Somali Muslims: saints of Islam, local Somali saints, and founders of different clan lineages.



© Aramco Services Company
Reading from the Quran

Ramadan

Somalia follows the traditions of all Islamic countries for the month of Ramadan, which is in the ninth month of the lunar calendar. During that month Somali Muslims do not eat or drink from sunset to sundown. Pregnant women and children are usually exempt from the fast. It is considered courteous, even for non-Muslims, to abstain from eating, drinking or even smoking in public in daylight during this time.

Id-al-Fitira

At the end of Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting, Muslims celebrate the *Id-al-Fitira* for three days. During this time, people come out in masses dressed in new clothes, and spend their time praying and exchanging presents.

Roobdoon

Somalis perform this ritual when their lands are threatened by drought. *Roobdoon* involves reading the Quran out loud in public places and praying for rain. Many animals are sacrificed on this occasion and the meat is given to the poor.

Allah Baari

Allah baari is a prayer ritual that is performed by a group of people (a village, a whole clan, or a single family). Here, Somalis come together to pray and to give cash and food to the poor or the local mosque. This ritual takes place before the group goes to war, has to travel, or tries to stave off disease and bad fortune that has been forecast by a religious person. Often, a religious figure will come and recite the Quran for several days during *Allah baari*.

The *Shihadah*

Most Somalis don't speak Arabic, but they all know about the *Shihadah*. If they observe or hear you say the words of the *Shihadah*, the first pillar of Islam, aloud, in their presence, you would automatically be considered a Muslim. Repeating the following phrases in public will cause attention. Do not say these words unless you mean them.

The *Shihadah*: *ash-hadu anna la ilaha illa allah, muhammad rasoul allah.*

A direct translation of this would be: "I testify that there is no God but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God."

The Mosque and Islam

The generic word for mosque in Somali is *masjid*. Islamic faith is vitally important to the Somali sense of national identity, although elements of pre-Islamic traditional religions exist in Somali folk spirituality.

Visiting a Mosque

You may want to visit a mosque while in Somalia. Non-Muslims can enter the mosque, but before entering, one should obtain permission first. Contact the *imam* (a religious elder), a *sheik*, or another person in charge of the premises. That person might say, “*Haga-lin*” (do not enter) or “*Muslim oo keli ah!*” (Only Muslims can enter!)

Exchange 2: At the Mosque

Soldier:	Would you permit me to enter the mosque?	ma ee oglaan kartaa eenaan so galo masaajidka?
Sheik:	No. It is only for Muslims.	maaya, muslim o keli-aa baa lo oguliya.

However, he may invite you to enter. In this case you must first thank him: “*mahad-sanid.*” (Thank you). At this point, he will ask you to remove your shoes: “*kabaaha iska seeb.*” In case he does not say that, or in case you do not understand what he is saying, remove your shoes anyway. In most mosques, there is a special place or rack to leave your shoes. The instruction to remove the shoes applies to anyone visiting a mosque.



© hamarey.com
View of a mosque

Exchange 3: Into the Mosque

Soldier:	Would you permit me to enter the mosque?	ma ee oglaan kartaa eenaan so galo masaajidka?
Sheik:	Yes, but you must remove your shoes.	haa, laakeen marka hore kabaaha iska seeb.
Soldier:	Thank you.	mahadsanid.

Once you are inside the mosque, you must not touch certain objects. Do not touch any artifacts and do not touch the walls, especially the north wall, where people direct their prayers. Most mosques have a shrine in one corner. Do not touch it.

Do not talk unless you are asked, and even then, talk in a whisper. Do not interrupt any person while he is praying. Do not walk in front of a person while he is praying, as this would invalidate his prayer and upset him. These rules apply to prayer inside or outside the mosque.

When Sunnis pray, they begin by standing up straight and placing their hands on their abdomen. (Shia Muslims, on the other hand, begin praying by placing their hands on their sides.)

You may see men handling what looks like rosary beads, but this does not mean that they are praying. Somali men, just as Arab men of all religions, carry these beads. Most Somali women wear a headscarf or veil and in most rural areas it is considered immoral to observe an adult woman who is not covered. Males are not required to cover their head.



© Charles Roffey
Somali women wearing headscarves

Traditions

Greetings

The following exchanges contain common greetings. The most common way of greeting another person is with the Arabic phrase *as salaamu 'alaykum*.



© Aramco Services Company
Weaver using a traditional loom

Exchange 4: Peace be upon you.

Soldier:	Peace be upon you.	as salaamu 'alaykum.
Somali:	And upon you be peace.	wa 'alaykum a salaam.
Soldier:	How are you (all)?	maHaa la sheygey?
Somali:	Fine, thank you.	waa la fee'an yahey, mahadsanid.

The morning greeting usually includes good wishes to the other person for the upcoming day. The following dialog shows a common greeting in the morning.

Exchange 5: Good morning.

Soldier:	Good morning.	subaH wanagsin.
Somali:	Good morning.	SubaH wanagsin.
Soldier:	Today is going to be a good day.	maanta maalin wanagsin bey nokon dontaa.
Somali:	Hopefully.	waan racheyneynaa inshaa alaaH.

A friendly phrase or idea is attached to the greetings to keep the conversation going. In the following dialog, the ubiquitous scheme of speculating about the weather is included.

Exchange 6: Good afternoon.

Soldier:	Good afternoon.	galab wanagsin.
Somali:	Good afternoon.	galab wanagsin.
Soldier:	Is tonight going to be a cool night?	'aawaa ma habeyn kaboo bey nokon dontaa?
Somali:	Yes, thank God.	haa, waa ilaaH mahedees.

After greeting somebody you have never met before, it is very common to ask for the name of that person. This is how the following dialog deals with this issue.

Exchange 7: What’s your name?

Soldier:	What’s your name?	adeegoo maga'aa?
Somali:	My name is Hassan.	maga'eygu waa Hasan.
Soldier:	I’m pleased to meet you, Hassan.	waan koo faraHsan-ahaay eenaan koo barto, Hasan.
Somali:	Me too!	aneegana seedo kaley!

Hospitality

When you visit a Somali, he will not discuss anything with you while you are outside or standing. The guest will be asked to enter the home and be seated. Somalis will serve you something—even if it is only water when they have nothing else to offer. You should graciously accept a small amount of what is offered and say “*mahadsanid*” (thank you).

Be mindful of the following points: While an American host would simply offer a plate of food and allow the guest to serve himself, a Somali host will serve you food using his right hand. Accept it with your right hand. In fact, whenever it comes to some sort of interaction using hands, **always use your right hand**. The left hand is considered unclean.



© Charles Roffey
Men in Hargeysa

Keep your feet down

When a Somali family invites you to their home and offers you a seat, do not cross your legs, as this is considered rude. In general, **do not show the bottom of your shoes to anybody**. Doing so is considered an insult.

Coffee? Tea?

If Somalis serve you tea, do not ask for coffee, because they usually only drink tea. Somalis like to brew tea with sugar, so it will probably be rather sweet. If it has less sugar or milk than you like, you may ask for more. To signal that you do *not* want a second cup, remove the cup from the person who is serving you and they will not refill it.

Exchange 8: Have some tea.

Somali host/ friend:	Please have some tea with us.	shaa nala 'ab walaal.
Soldier/guest:	Thank you very much, Sir.	aad baad oo mahadsan tahaay walaal.

Exchanging Gifts

Somalis might not expect to give or receive presents unless there is a special connection between the two parties. Be prepared to give gifts, as there’s a good chance that you will receive one. The gift need not be expensive and the recipient may or may not open the gift in front of you.

Exchange 9: Oh, you shouldn’t have.

Somali:	This is for you.	adeega ken iskaa leh.
Soldier:	You shouldn’t have.	ma ahayn inaad ee keyntid.
Somali:	It’s just a little thing.	waa waH iyar.
Soldier:	Thank you.	mahadsanid.

The Shirt off his Back

Staying on the subject of admiration, if someone admires or compliments a Somali’s possessions, then he will turn right around and give the article to him. So be careful with your compliments. If you accidentally forget this rule, and the Somali offers you the shirt off his back, thank him and politely refuse. Nevertheless, he will go ahead and offer it two more times. Refuse all three times, politely and graciously.

Exchange 10: Shirt off his Back

Soldier:	Your shirt is nice.	shaakaagu woo fee'aa yahey.
Somali:	Please accept it, it’s yours.	fadlan eegaa ogolo, adeegaa iskaa le.
Soldier:	No, thank you, it’s yours.	maaya, mahadsanid, adeegaa iskaa le.

Gender Issues

Women occupy the bottom rungs of the Somali social ladder. They are married off by their families at a relatively early age (some as young as 13 or 14) and they must then defer every decision to their husband. Illiteracy among Somali women is estimated to be 80 percent, since only boys are accepted into the ubiquitous Quranic schools.



DoD image
Woman near Marka

While women must perform the bulk of chores and all housework, healthcare is rarely available to them. Furthermore, almost all Somali females are infibulated at about five years of age. This traditional practice involves removing the majority of female genitalia, then sewing the mutilated organ together, leaving only a tiny opening. This ‘operation,’ which is performed without anesthesia and under unsanitary conditions, often leads to infections and illness and can cause massive problems during menses and childbirth. The practice of female genital mutilation is tied to Somali tradition, not to Islam.

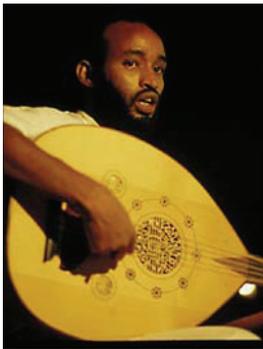
Use of Incense

Incense has great importance in Somali society. Women burn incense at dusk, believing this ritual purifies their homes. Many other rituals, such as *madaxshub*, include the burning of incense as well. Here, a pregnant woman's female friends and neighbors gather around her when she is close to term. While prayers are said, incense is burned along with oil that has been perfumed with coffee beans. Each participant pours a few drops of boiling oil into the palm of her hand from a wooden spoon and anoints her forehead. This is a sign of prayer and respect.

Celebrations

Huss

The *Huss* ceremony serves to commemorate one's ancestors. Animals are sacrificed and their meat is distributed among relatives and the poor. It is believed that these sacrifices will reach the ancestors in the afterlife. *Huss* is solemnly celebrated by Somalis everywhere.¹⁶



© Aramco Services Company
Playing the Ud

Dab-shid

Dab-shid, the "Festival of Fire," falls on either July 27th or 28th and marks the beginning of the Somali solar year. Although Somalis, like all Muslims, follow the lunar year, they also observe the solar calendar to time crop production and animal husbandry. During this festival, people build bonfires, splash water, and perform stick fights and dances, in some communities. *Dab-shid*, also called *Neeroosh*, is probably a remnant of fire and sun worship stemming from ancient Persian influences.

Exchange 11: *Dab-shid*

Soldier:	What is this procession about?	maHaa halkan ka jira?
Somali:	Today is Dab-shid.	manta waa dab shid.
Soldier:	Thank you.	mahadsanid.

Processions

You may come across Somalis conducting a procession. These processions mark events such as funerals, religious celebrations or non-religious festivals. In either case, let the procession pass. Stand back and show respect.

Exchange 12: What's this procession all about?

Soldier:	What is this procession about?	maHaa halkan ka jira.
Somali:	Today is Robdoon.	manta waa robdon.
Soldier:	Thank you.	mahadsanid.

¹⁶ http://www.civicwebs.com/cwvlib/africa/somalia/1994/dawn_of_civilization/chapter_21.htm

Firing Rifles in Celebration

Very important note: In some parts of Somalia, people occasionally fire their rifles in celebration of the birth of a baby, a battle victory, or a wedding. This is part of the present Somali way of life which originates in nomadic Arab culture.

There could be a big crowd of people firing their rifles in the air. **Please be aware of this rifle tradition.** You could hear shots being fired and assume that there is fighting going on somewhere. Before you jump to conclusions, ascertain that the rifle shots are not connected to some kind of celebration.

Exchange 13: Why are they firing their weapons?

Soldier:	What is all this firing about?	maHaa da'aay o Habadaha lo ridiyaa?
Somali:	We have a wedding going on.	waHaa chira aros.

Useful Information:

Indecent language

Many Somalis are familiar with American slang words. For this reason, do not use obscene or indecent language within earshot of Somali citizens. They will hear you, understand you, and take great offense. Bottom-line: **No four-letter words, please.**

Exchange 14: It is forbidden to use foul language.

Somali:	It is forbidden to use foul language in public.	waa mamnoo' inaad mer feagaare-aa hadar 'aay-aa koo hadasho.
Soldier:	Thank you for telling me.	sheygitaan-kaaga waad koo mahadsan tahaay.



© Charles Roffey
Schoolboys in Harqeysa

Eye contact

In American culture, breaking eye contact may be misconstrued as insincerity. Not so in Somalia. Breaking eye contact does not imply rudeness, ill will, or concealment of the truth. It is just a cultural trait. Additionally, if you are a male soldier, **do not stare at Somali women.**

Affection

You will see Somali men embracing one another or placing their hands on each other's shoulders. This is a sign of friendship or kinship, not homosexuality.

Just walking

You will also see Somali men walking down the street holding each other's hand. Again, this just indicates friendship or kinship. By the same token, you will see Somali women exchanging these gestures of affection with one another, and again, these are innocent gestures.

Somali society has zero tolerance for homosexuality. In fact, avoid the subject of sexuality entirely. If you are asked about your own practices, you might answer that this is a personal matter and you would prefer not to discuss it.

Vendettas

The Lawless Generation: Fear the One who has the Biggest Force

Whole generations of Somali have grown up in times of lawlessness. These people have known war and violence since the outbreak of the Somali Civil War in 1991. There is a popular saying among nomads: “My full brother and I are against my father, my father’s household is against my uncle’s household, our two households (my uncle’s and mine) are against the rest of the immediate kin, the immediate kin is against non-immediate members of my clan, our clan is against other clans, and my nation and I are against the world.”



© Aramco Services Company
Men chatting on a street

Be extremely cautious about whom you hire as an

interpreter. Remember that people have a tendency to maintain loyalty to their own ethnic group or clan above the interests of the foreigner. Remember the old saying above.

Revenge Killings

The concept of “vendetta” is alive and well in Somalia. A tribe may seek to avenge the violent death of a tribe member by killing a member of the enemy tribe responsible for the killing. Somali justice is based on the notion of “an eye for an eye.” This is legal in the eyes of the community. The only way to end these retribution killings is for the enemy tribe to settle the dispute by paying *diya*. This is compensation paid by a person who has injured or killed another person. Failure to pay a just amount of *diya* may lead to an endless settling of the same old score between the tribes. It could even lead to a civil war with catastrophic consequences.

Rifles Abound

Somalis are basically warriors. Generations of men have been skirmishing for water, camels, and women. They have been involved in civil wars after the collapse of Siad Barre’s regime. Thus, they are very adept at close range rifle combat. Most families own at least one rifle.

In the following exchange, the soldier asks the Somali to surrender his weapon temporarily while on coalition grounds or passing through a checkpoint. Do not expect a Somali man to give up his rifle willingly. He owns his rifle to protect his home and family, and it is a question of honor. He will not give it up easily unless agreement is arranged through consensus.

Exchange 15: Surrender your weapon.

Soldier:	Are you carrying weapons?	hub meeyaad sidataa?
Somali:	Yes, I am.	haa, waan sitaa.
Soldier:	Please surrender your weapon, and you may enter.	waa inaad eeska deebtaa hubka, kadib sogal.

Dress Codes

Dress Code, Male

- No shorts.
- Take shoes/boots off in mosques.
- Keep your shirt on, even in the hottest, most humid weather.

Dress for Somali Men

Men wear western pants or a flowing plaid *ma'awis* (kilts), western shirts, and shawls. They may wrap a colorful turban around their head or wear a *koofiyad* (embroidered cap).

Dress Code, Female

- No shorts.
- No mini-skirts.
- Take shoes/boots off in mosques.
- Wear a headscarf in mosques.
- In general, do not attract attention.



© Charles Roffey
Women shopping at a market

Dress for Somali Women

Women usually wear one of the following dresses:

- *Direh*, a long billowing dress worn over petticoats.
- *Goantino*, a cloth that is four yards long, worn tied over the shoulder and draped around the waist.
- *Toob* (also called *hijab* and commonly worn throughout Africa) and headscarves are very common.

Do's and Don'ts

Do's

Somalis of the same sex warmly greet each other with handshakes or by placing their right hand over their heart.

A swift twist of the open hand means "nothing" or "no."

Snapping fingers may mean "long ago" or "and so on."

A thumb under the chin indicates "fullness."

When you sit down, keep your feet on the ground and your soles hidden from view. Here are some examples of allowable sitting: **Note: INSERT 2-3 IMAGES HERE**

Don'ts

Do not cross your legs, as this is considered rude. Do not show the bottom of your shoes to anybody. It is impolite to point the sole of one's foot or shoe at another person.

Shaking hands with the opposite sex is to be avoided.

Do not make the “A-OK” sign (forming a circle with the index finger and the thumb of one hand). This is considered to be an obscene and offensive gesture in Somalia. The thumbs-up sign is considered to be offensive as well.

It is also rude and impolite to use the single index finger to call or beckon to a Somali to come or approach you (this gesture is used for summoning dogs).

Do not point at anybody with a finger. Use your whole hand (the **right** hand) instead.

The extended middle finger, an obscene gesture in most of the Western world, is equally obscene in Somalia.

Making a fist with one hand and bending the arm upward while catching the bicep with the other hand is very obscene. Better not to do it.

When discussing matters with someone and they come up with a wild idea, do not point at your head or touch all fingers to your brain. It means “you are crazy.”

Urban Life

Health Issues

The health situation in Somalia is one of the worst in Africa. At just over 47 years, a Somali's life expectancy is one the lowest in the world¹⁷. While the International Federation of Red Cross/Red Crescent is the main healthcare provider in Somaliland and Puntland, the outlook on healthcare in the rest of the region is bleak. After the ouster of the Barre regime, the government health system collapsed as well. Most trained medical personnel left the country in order to survive. Medication is hard to come by, even the supplies available in private pharmacies are already past expiration. Tuberculosis cases are on the rise, and infant mortality rates are among the highest in the world.

According to "Doctors without Borders,"¹⁸ the absence of qualified medical personnel forces Somalis to consult traditional healers. These traditional "doctors" are usually older men in the community who learned their trade from their elders. They are mostly incapable of dealing with obstetrics complications and other illnesses. Their methods of treatment are primitive at best and include the burning of the skin with fire, use of herbs, and healing ceremonies.

Natural disasters continue to burden the already vulnerable population, be it flooding in the Lower Juba and Shebelle valleys or drought in the north. Malnutrition and the spread of preventable diseases (such as measles) claim many lives each year. Moreover, violent acts committed by militia forces and warlords in areas without any emergency assistance are responsible for numerous fatalities.

Employment

In urban areas, unemployment rates reached 61,5% in 2002.¹⁹ Fifty percent of all jobs available to the labor force are in the service industry, while roughly 25% of workers are employed in both agriculture and other industries. The 2003 World Bank Report estimated that 43% of Somalis live in extreme poverty with an income not exceeding a dollar per day. Many men joined the militias after 1995, as these took control of many available jobs. For example, while large quantities of food donations used to be processed at the Port of Mogadishu, this task is now handled directly on the beach by different militias.



© hamarey.com
View of Mogadishu

The fishing industry was formerly an important source of employment and income for coastal Somalis. The waters off the long Somali coastline have a production potential of over 180,000 tons of fish per year.²⁰ Different political factions issued fishing licenses to international fleets in order to finance their militias. Additionally, fleets from all over the

¹⁷ The World Bank, Somalia, Data & Statistics, <http://www.worldbank.org>

¹⁸ Médecins Sans Frontières, <http://www.msf.org>

¹⁹ World Bank & UNDP, Socio-Economic Survey 2002

²⁰ French Embassy in Kenya

world exploit the Somali waters without requesting licenses. This trawling is illegal, but Somalis are unable to stop the practice.

Education

Somalia’s higher education system was developed in the 1950s, when it was first instituted by the Italian government.²¹ The Somali National University had over 15,000 students and 13 faculties.²² The demise of the Barre regime left the educational system in shambles, but trust funds, tuition fees, and donations made it possible to re-open Mogadishu University in the late 1990s. It now functions as a private institution with over 300 registered students. Amoud and Hargeysa have also restarted their higher educational programs. Primary education has been re-established by local administrations and Islamist groups, yet enrollment remains low.²³

Qat market

Qat, (also spelled khat, chat or kat) is a mild stimulant used by many Somali men. It is derived from the fresh leaves of the *catha edulis* tree, which are chewed to release the stimulant, purportedly giving the user a mild high, heightened awareness, and increased energy. However, it can cause feelings of anxiety and aggression, and some people find that it makes them irritable, sometimes even angry or violent. Qat can make a user so psychologically dependent that when they stop using it, they feel depressed, and it has been observed to worsen pre-existing mental health problems. Those with social problems, such as unemployment, may be more prone to excessive use. Heavy users also develop insomnia, heart problems, and impotence. **American service members are prohibited from using qat; it is classified as an illegal drug in the United States.**



© Charles Roffey
Men chewing qat

Exchange 16: Where is the market?

Soldier:	Where is the market?	sooka waa Hagay?
Somali:	The market is down that street and to the left.	sooka waa, marka lagoo dego chidkan dina'eesa bidiH.
Soldier:	Please show me.	fadlan ee tus.

Exchange 17: This is qat.

Soldier:	What is this?	kanee waa maHaay?
Somali:	It is called khat, try some.	waHaa la yirah-daa Khaat, daadamee.
Soldier:	No, thank you.	maaya, mahadsanid.

²¹ International Network for Higher Education in Africa, Somalia, Mohamed Nur-Awaleh, http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/inhea/profiles/Somalia.htm

²² Ibid.

²³ Economist Intelligence Unit: Country ViewsWire, Somalia: Education, May 9, 2005

Traffic Jams

The streets of Mogadishu are choked with people and traffic during rush hours. Traffic jams are not only an annoyance, but also a death trap. If a fight breaks out between two groups, innocent people could get trapped here. Therefore, coalition soldiers must extricate themselves from traffic jams quickly while remaining as polite as possible. Obscene language will be counter-productive. (Many Somalis have seen enough American movies to understand English four-letter words). Instead it works much better to use tactful, respectful language.



© hamarey.com
Street scene in Somalia

Exchange 18: Traffic Commands

Soldier:	Please give way!	fadlan jid i see!
Somali:	Hold on, please!	fadlan is sug!
Soldier:	Please, pull over!	fadlan jidka ka baH!
Somali:	What for?	sababtu waa maHaay?
Soldier:	Please, let the military vehicle pass.	fadlan oo baney baaboorta 'iidamadu iney gudbaan.

Food

In Somalia the most important meal of the day is lunch. Somali cuisine is deeply influenced by Italian cuisine due to the period of Italian colonialization. Noodles are often eaten as a main dish; spaghetti in particular is very popular. Many types of Somali foods contain millet, a grain that grows quickly without needing much water in this dry region. A simple breakfast often consists of a piece of millet bread or millet porridge. The evening meal is usually made up of light corn flour patties.²⁴ Like other Muslims, Somalis do not eat pork and do not drink alcohol. They serve tea to visitors and like their tea sweet or spicy.

Sharing Food

If you are on break and eating a snack or a meal and there are Somali children or men nearby, it would be a kind gesture to offer some of your food to them. If you offer food only once, they will probably say no. So, you should offer a second or even a third time, and then they might smile and accept your offer.

Exchange 19: Please have some food.

Soldier:	Please have some food.	Hogaa 'un walaal!
Somali:	No thanks.	mahadsanid.

²⁴ Canadian Government Cultural Profiles Project, Eating the Somali Way, <http://www.cp-pc.ca/english/somalia/eating.html>

Exchange 20: You have to eat!

Soldier:	Please have some food. You have to eat some!	so freesu, waa in aad Hogaa 'untaa!
Somali:	Thank you very much.	aad baad u mahadsan tahaay.

Street Vendors

It is OK to accept food when you know and trust the one who has offered you food. However, do not buy food from street vendors. You can never be sure about the safety of this food. However, you may be allowed to buy trinkets during your off-duty hours.



© Charles Roffey
Fruit vendors

Exchange 21: Would you buy something sweet?

Somali vendor:	Buy some sweets? They are delicious!	eebso Hogaa ma' ma'aan ah? aad bey oo fee'an tahaay!
Soldier:	Thank you, they sure look great.	waad mahadsan tahaay, waHey oo eg tahaay waH fee'an.

Exchange 22: What are you selling?

Soldier:	What are you selling? It looks nice.	maHaad gadeysaa? waa kurHon tahaay.
Somali:	Please try it. It's 100 shillings.	fadlan teechaabee waa bokol sheelin.
Soldier:	Here you go, thank you.	waakan waad mahadsan tahaay.

Politely, please

Somalis will sometimes show up at various coalition facilities seeking jobs, medical attention, or police assistance. They might also be selling food, snacks, or souvenirs. In most cases, the guard must redirect them or turn them away politely and respectfully. However, if they come with information about insurgents, follow the procedures given to you by your commander.

Exchange 23: I saw insurgents.

Somali:	I saw some insurgents hiding in that house.	waHaan arkey moriyaan iskoo karinayaan gureegaas.
Soldier:	Thank you. Please stay here.	mahadsanid, fadlan halkan see ju.

Exchange 24: When did they come?

Soldier:	When did the insurgents arrive?	moriyaanta gormey bey yimaaden?
Somali:	They came here yesterday.	shaley bey yimaaden.
Soldier:	When did they leave?	gormey bey baHen?
Somali:	They left today.	maanta ayey baHen.

Exchange 25: Which village did the insurgents come from?

Soldier:	Which village did the insurgents come from?	tooladey bey moriyaanta ke yimaaden.
Somali:	They came from a village in the East.	waHaay ke yimaaden toolo ku taala bareyga.
Soldier:	Point to it on this map please.	<i>fadlan eega tilmaan maabka.</i>

Urban Fighting

Sometimes, you will hear shots being fired. Inquire what is going on. While shots may be connected to some type of celebration, it would be dangerous to assume that is always the case.

Exchange 26: Urban Fighting

Soldier:	What is all this shooting about?	maHaa da'aay o Habadaha lo ridiyaa?
Somali:	There is fighting going on.	waHaa jira dagaal.

Exchange 27: Gang Fights

Soldier:	What is all this shooting about?	maHaa da'aay o Habadaha lo ridiyaa?
Somali:	It is between the local people and armed gangs.	waa dagaal ka deHeya dadka eeyo moreeyaanta.

Exchange 28: Are coalition forces involved?

Somali:	There is fighting going on.	waHaa jira dagaal.
Soldier:	Is it against Coalition Forces?	ma waHaa loga so horjeydaa 'iidamada isbahaysiga?
Somali:	No.	maaya.
Soldier:	Thank you.	mahadsanid.

Rural Life

Tribal Distribution

Language, culture, devotion to Islam, and the connection to one mythical ancestor named Samaal are the main elements that unite Somalis of all clans and tribes. The population today consists of 85% Somali, 15% Bantu and other non-Somalis, which also includes 30,000 Arabs. The Somalis belong to a sub-branch of the Cushites, the Omo-Tana group, which all have very similar languages. The Somali language is a member of the Eastern Cushitic language group that also includes Oromo and Afar.²⁵



DoD image
Camel herder

According to modern research, Somalis originated in Southern Ethiopia.²⁶ Many believe that the region's ongoing internal struggles can be traced back to an original six-clan-division, which is similar to the tribal segmentation described in the Old Testament. The modern Somali state created in the 1960s represents the influence of European colonial forces; nevertheless, allegiances of the different Somali factions lie along ancestral lines. This became especially clear in the 1990s, when Somalia disintegrated into warring factions. These factions represented lineages and clans going far beyond the regional boundaries created during colonial times.

From another point of view, the fact that Somalia's struggle goes on despite shared cultural traits and a common language may be traced back to centuries of clan fighting for control over the region's limited resources, such as land and water.²⁷

The Clans

The Digil and Rahenwayn represent about 20% of the population. They live in southern Somalia along the Juba and Shebelle rivers. These tribes rely on their cattle and camels as well as on some cultivation of the land.

The Dir clan's geographical position is a disputed one. Some sources argue that there is a Northern and a Southern Dir Clan, and the Dirs live in large areas in Somalia and Ethiopia. They are different from the Isaaq and Issa Clans who live in northwestern Somaliland.²⁸

The Hawiye live in the south-central region of Somalia. Mogadishu falls within the territory of a Hawiye sub-clan, the Abgaal. The Hawiye and the Isaaq clans are the second largest in Somalia. The Siad Barre regime attacked and assaulted the Hawiye

²⁵ Library of Congress Country Study, Somalia, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/sotoc.html#so0013>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The Plight of the Agro-Pastoral Society of Somalia, Mohamed H. Mukhtar, http://www.arlaadinet.com/D&MHistory/SomaliHistory/somali_history.htm

²⁸ Somaliland protests being called "northern Dir clan", afrol news, Septemebr 2, 2005, <http://www.afrol.com/articles/13854>

toward the end of 1980s, which resulted in the creation of more and more saboteurs and snipers in the capital. In the end, it meant that the regime lost all support, and eventually it also led to the actual fall of the military dictatorship headed by Barre.

The Isaaq live in the northern part of Somalia. Hargeysa, Burao, and Berbera are all predominantly Isaaq. The Somali National Movement (SNM) was founded by the Isaacs, who felt suppressed by the central government. In 1988, the Isaaq took the town of Burao and part of Hargeysa. Siad Barre's answer was terror—his forces attacked the cities and killed many innocent people. Over 300,000 people fled to Ethiopia²⁹ to escape Barre's murderous revenge.

The Darood clan is the third largest, and they live in northeastern Somalia. The Barre government was dominated by members of the Darood clan, and when Barre was removed from power, many clans turned against the Darood in revenge.

Tribal or Clan Traditions

In Somali society, clans serve as a source of great solidarity—as well as conflict. Clans combine forces for protection, access to water or good land, and political power.

The Somali clan organization is an unstable system, characterized by changing alliances and temporary coalitions. In times of conflict, the elders of each party mediate in the matter. This process is called *gar* (justice).



© Charles Roffey
Camel traders

When a new project or matter is undertaken, you may be invited to join in the discussions; affected villagers or the tribal elders are usually included as well. The villagers may slaughter a sheep or goat and prepare an enormous meal in your honor. After they prepare the food, everybody sits around it on the ground and eats without forks, knives, spoons, or individual plates. Remember, they are doing all this to honor you. To refuse is to dishonor them as it might question the sincerity of the matter.

Pastoral Somali society is fundamentally democratic. Traditionally, councils of men make the decisions. In these, “all men are councilors and all men are politicians.” These councils are egalitarian, sometimes to the point of anarchy, although age, lineage, seniority, and wealth can have varying degrees of influence. The councils will gather under a large tree in the center of the village and discuss any matter of importance under its boughs.

Nomadic Lifestyle

Most of Somalia is too arid for crop production, so about 60% of all Somalis are nomadic or semi-nomadic. Their principal sources of livelihood are raising cattle, camels, sheep, and goats. People move around with their flocks in order to ensure that the animals have

²⁹ Somalia Country Study, U.S. Library of Congress, <http://countrystudies.us/somalia/30.htm>

continued access to water and food. Livestock and livestock-related products are the main commodities for trade and export.

A quarter of the population, which lives in the fertile agricultural zone between the Juba and Shebelle Rivers in southern Somalia³⁰, derives its livelihood from bananas, a leading cash crop. Other food crops such as maize and sorghum are also significant economic sources for nomadic traders in this region.

Food

The food habits of Somali nomads and shepherds are connected mainly to animal products, with meat and milk being the food staples. Some herders may drink more than two gallons of milk per day, which stays fresh for days despite the heat. A special fermented mild drink is *chino*, which is prepared by burying a leather flask full of camel milk in the sand for a month. Meat products are derived from camels, goats, sheep, lambs, or cattle. Where agricultural activity is possible, products may comprise corn, millet, beans, fruits, and vegetables. Imported rice is also consumed regularly.³¹

Available Schooling

Among nomadic tribes, there are hamlets which consist of as many as ten families, and each has its own teacher, who is typically a male adult. These teachers not only serve as mentors to young boys studying the Quran, they also perform important social functions, such as officiating in marriages and conducting religious and funeral services. They may also serve as advocates, resolving family and community disputes. Giving a young male the opportunity to study Islamic teachings is considered the best gift a father can bequeath his son, and often pupils go on to become spiritual leaders in the community. A fundamental axiom and sacred imperative for both teachers and students of the Quran is that they spread the teachings without monetary or personal gain.³²



© Charles Roffey
Camel driver

Rural Transportation

Of Somalia's over 22,000 km (13,670 mi) of roads, only 2,600 km (1,616 mi) are paved. Unpaved roads always pose a transportation challenge, as most of them cannot be used during the rainy season. Only six of Somalia's sixty airports have paved runways, and just four of those are longer than 3,000 meters (9,843 feet).³³ Nomads and shepherds use pack animals to move their belongings and get around.

Search and Cordon

If searching somebody's house, **do not bring a dog inside his house. It is a great insult and it could get you killed.** If circumstances allow, knock on the door before you enter.

³⁰ Nation-by-Nation, Somalia Population, <http://www.nationbynation.com/Somalia/Population.html>

³¹ <http://www.cp-pc.ca/english/somalia/eating.html>

³² www.civicwebs.com/cwvlib

³³ CIA World Factbook, Somalia

Courtesy will go a long way to save lives. Give the man of the house a chance to protect his family's honor. Avoid barging in on the family while the women are not covered.

In the following exchange, we assume that the Somali man of the house cooperates, but DO NOT assume that this will always happen. Often you will not be able to extend as much courtesy as the following exchange indicates.

Exchange 29: Allow us to inspect your house.

Soldier:	Please allow us to inspect your house.	walal no ogolo eenaan barno gureegaaga.
Somali:	Sure, but just a minute while I get the family and the kids outside.	waa yahay, Hogaa ee sug, reyrkeyga iyo 'aaroorteyda aan dibada oo so saarey.
Soldier:	Take your time.	deg deg ma jirto.

At the Checkpoint

People often do not carry identification cards in Somalia. When asking for identification, do it politely. The following exchange gives you an example of how you can ask Somalis to identify themselves.

Exchange 30: ID's, please.

Soldier:	May I trouble you for your IDs please?	dib haa kogo ahaatey akonsigaagee meyey?
Somali:	Here, take them.	waa kan kaado.



DoD image
Grouping at a checkpoint

Unrelated Males and Females

If at all possible, allow families to stay together at a checkpoint; do not separate them. Do not place males and females into the same group if they are not related. For example, if you are guarding a checkpoint and you must order the passengers of a bus to step off so that you can ask them questions, try to lead the males into one group and the females into another group. Again, be careful not to group unrelated males and females together.

Addressing Women

It would be far better to enlist a female coalition soldier to do the talking with women. This way, you protect the honor of the women. If, however, there is no female soldier to address a Somali woman, the best thing is for the male soldier to address a male family member of the Somali woman, not the Somali woman directly. On the other hand, a female soldier may speak directly with a Somali male without reservation.

Exchange 31: Your ID, Ma'am.

Soldier:	Ma'am, your ID please.	walaal akonsigaaga meyey?
Somali woman:	I do not have an ID.	ma haaysto akonsee.

Do Not Touch Somali Women

If you are a male soldier, do not touch Somali women. If you must search a woman, then find a female soldier to do it. If you are a male soldier and you touch a Somali woman, there could be lethal consequences.

Family Life

The Somali Family

Somalis value their families deeply. Strong family ties provide a safety net in times of need, and the protection of family honor is crucial. Loyalty is an important value and can extend beyond family and clan. Somalis cherish their friendships. Once a Somali becomes a friend, he is usually one for life.

Exchange 32: Are you related?

Soldier:	Are you related?	karaabo miyaad tiheen?
Somali:	No, we are not.	maaya waHba iskoomaa neehin.

Somalis have frequently enjoyed a form of protected relationship with specific Somali lineages and clans. Somali families traditionally live in multi-generation households, and it is common for a Somali family to have seven or eight children, plus their relatives, such as grandfather, grandmother, in-laws, cousins, aunts and uncles, all living under the same roof.

Exchange 33: How are you related?

Soldier:	How are you related?	maHaad iskoo tiheen?
Somali:	He is my cousin.	waHaan nahaay ilmo adeyr.

The Somali Household

Extended families often live together in one house. Under Islamic law, a man may have as many as four wives, but that only occurs if he can support them equally. The head of the house is the father. Somali men consider themselves warriors and often leave the women in charge of the household.



© hamarey.com
Mother and daughters

His Other House

If you are searching for a man, and you come to his house, they may tell you that he is at his other house. If a man takes a second wife, she usually lives in a second house—if he can afford it. Nevertheless, his name, not the wife’s name, will be on the deed of both properties. So, when they tell you that he is at “his other house,” they mean that he is in the other house where the other wife lives. Additionally, asking for the father of the woman’s children is considered a polite way of asking for her husband.

Exchange 34: His other house

Soldier:	Where is the father of your children?	meyey 'aroortaada aabahod?
Somali woman:	In his other house.	kureegeesa kale.
Soldier:	Thank you.	mahadsanid.

The Evil Eye

In Somali culture, people believe in the “evil eye,” which can be given to someone by a purposeful or accidental gaze from an envious or admiring eye. As a result, some harm is done to the person who is being praised or admired. A relevant example of this is when a health care professional from the West tells an expectant mother that her baby is big and healthy. While in Western culture a person might interpret this benign statement as good news and reason for relief and happiness, a Somali mother may fear that as a result of such praise, some harm will come to her baby. One popular belief in Islamic culture is that one should not admire or compliment anything unless using the expression “*ma sha Allah*” (May God protect him).



© Aramco Services Company
Somali woman

Exchange 35: My son, Ahmed

Somali:	This is my son Ahmed.	kan waa weelkeyga aHmed
Soldier:	He looks so smart, may God protect him.	waHoo oo igyahey 'agleelo, maasha alaah.

Women in Society

While women do not enjoy equal status in Somali society, the socialist regime under Barre improved their opportunities. Thus, Somali women now have more freedom to become educated, to work, and to travel than do Muslim women in other Islamic countries. Before the 1969 revolution, 20% of primary school students were girls; in 1979, the figure approached 40%.

During the 2003 Somali Peace Conference in Kenya, there were only a few women delegates, 35 out of 362; nevertheless, this tiny step should be seen as progress. Despite all obstacles, a few women are making their presence felt in ways that would have been unlikely, if not impossible, in the 1990s.

Proper Interaction with Somali Women

Address a woman older than you as *eedo*. This is like calling her “ma’am”, but even more respectful. Call a younger woman *walaal*, which literally means “my sister,” but is taken to mean “miss or ma’am.” If you are a male soldier, you should not speak to any Somali woman unless a male member of her family accompanies her. Further, you should request the man to answer your question.

How is your Wife? Don’t Ask!

Usually only family, relatives, and very close friends of the family are permitted to ask: “How is your wife?” Other than that, if you are a male, do not ask a Somali man: “How is your wife?”, “How is your sister?”, “How is your daughter?”, or “How is your mother?” Just ask, “How is your family?” Only if you are a female can you feel free to ask about the women in the family.

Exchange 36: How’s the family?

Soldier:	How are you, how’s the family?	iscaa waran, rerka ka waran?
Somali:	Thanks to God, they are fine, thanks.	al-Hamdu lilaah, wey fee'an yiheen, mahadsanid.
Soldier:	Thanks to God.	al-Hamdu lilaah.

Addressing Men

Address a male older than you as *adeer* in order to show respect. It is not customary to call younger men by their name if you are not a friend. Do not use *sheik* to address anyone, as this may be construed as being derogatory.

When standing and talking with someone, avoid “eye to eye” contact, especially while in a heated discussion and avoid staring at people in general. That might be perceived as a challenge. Also, if you are involved in a confrontation, avoid invading the person’s personal space; otherwise a fight might break out.

Exchange 37: After you, please.

Soldier:	Please get in.	fadlan so gal.
Somali:	No, please, after you.	maaya, walaal adeega eega hormar.

Somali Names

Introduction³⁴

A complete Somali name has a minimum of three components and often four, five, or more. The Somali naming system differs somewhat from the system used in the West, but it also bears certain similarities. In both the Western and Somali naming systems, the parents give a newborn child a “given name” which appears as the first name. In the West, that name might be “John” or “Mary,” and in Somalia, that might be “Mohamed” or “Fadumo.”



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A group of boys

The So-Called “Middle Name”

In the West, we have the concept of a “middle name.” A male may bear the first and middle names, such as “John Paul,” and a female may be named “Mary Elizabeth.” The concept of the “middle name” does not exist in Somalia. Instead, every child takes his father’s first name as his own second name.

For example, let us say the child’s first name is Mohamed. His father’s first name is Husayn. The child’s first and second names will be, respectively, Mohamed Husayn. If

³⁴ <http://www.culturalorientation.net/somali/sname.html>

Mohamed has a sister, Fadumo, her first two names will be Fadumo Husayn. In other words, this rule applies to boys and girls alike.

The Surname

So far, Somali and Western names do not differ greatly. However, after the second name, we may find significant divergence. In the West, the name that follows the middle name is the family name, i.e., the last name or surname. Thus, when we meet “John Paul Goldenpepper” and “Mary Elizabeth Goldenpepper,” we could infer from the last name that they are related by blood or marriage. With Somali names, the third name may not be the last name at all. Yet all Somalis have three names.

Unlike English, where given and family names are derived from cultural and paternal sources respectively, Somalis routinely assign three or even four names in an elaborate system based on a given name, followed by the father’s given name, then the grandfather’s given name, and lastly maybe the tribal name. Women do not change their names at marriage, and Somalis have only one readily available supply for all three names. As a result, many names are the same or very similar.

Mohamed	Given name
Husayn	Given name of father
Ali	Given name of paternal grandfather

This is also the way a Somali’s name will most likely show up on his official documents, e.g. passport, national ID, driver’s license.

Differentiation by Tribal Name

In order to differentiate themselves, Somalis will sometimes add their tribal name to their name, for example, Muhammad Abdallah Ali Isaaq and Muhammad Abdallah Ali Abgaal. The first three names for these two men are identical, but to distinguish one from the other, their tribal name, or the name of the city where they grew up, is used as well.



© hamarey.com
Somali village

Prefixes and Suffixes in Somali Names

Any component of the name could contain two segments – a prefix plus a stem or a stem plus a suffix. A common prefix is *Abd* - “servant of...” Muslims believe the highest service is service to *Allah* (God). According to Islam, *Allah* has 99 attributes, some of which are: *al-Rah-man* (“The Merciful”), *al-Raheem* (“The Compassionate”), *al-‘Aleem*, (“The Most Knowing”), *al-Kareem* (“The Generous”), etc.

Abd Names

A common way to form names is to add the prefix *Abd* in front of *Allah* or one of His 99 attributes, e.g., *Abdallah* (Servant of Allah), *Abd al-Kareem* (Servant of The Generous

[God]), *Abd al-Rahman* (Servant of The Merciful [God]), etc. Problems arise in how to write these names using the Roman alphabet.

For any *Abd* name, a multitude of spellings are possible, for example: *Abd al-Rahman / Abdul Rahman / Abdarahman / Abdal Rahman / Abd alrahman / Abdurrahman / Abdel Rahman / Abd elrahman / Abderrahmane*. Statistically, the *Abdel / Abdal* configurations tend to show up with the most frequency.

Ina (the Son of) Names

Another key prefix is *Ina* - “son of,” or alternatively, “daughter of.” Somali people take enormous pride in their fathers, and they take pride in something else too: their names! Recall in the example above, *Mohamed’s* father is named *Husayn*. *Mohamed* will take such pride in *Husayn* that he will name himself after his father. He will call himself *Ina Husayn*, i.e., “Son of Husayn.” Soon his relatives, friends, neighbors, and co-workers will start calling him *Ina Husayn* instead of *Mohamed*.



© Charles Roffey
Hargeysa couple

Nick names or Naanays

Perhaps because so many Somali names are similar, nearly all men and some women are identified by public names or *naanays*.

Exchange 38: Do you have a nickname?

Soldier:	Do you have a nickname?	naanays ma le dahaay?
Somali:	No, I don't.	maaya ma lihee.

There are two kinds of *naaney*: One is used as an overt nickname, and is similar to a Western nickname.

Exchange 39: Overt nicknames

Soldier:	Please, I am looking for Ahmed Abdul-Kadir.	fadlan waHaan traadeeniya naa aHmed 'abdul-kaadir.
Somali:	I know, you mean the tall Ahmed? You might find him in the market.	waan ogahey, waHaad oola cheydaa aHmed derey? waa laga yaabaa eenaad ka hesho sooka.
Soldier:	Thank you.	mahadsanid.

The other typed of *naaney* is a covert nickname. It is used to talk about a person, but would rarely be used to address that person directly.

Exchange 40: Covert nicknames

Soldier:	Do you know Liban Omar?	miyaad takaan leevan 'umar?
Somali:	The man with only two cows.	nin-ka laba sa'alaha a.

The Origin of Names

The origin of Somali names is often Cushitic or Arabic. Most names have meaning, and certain names are given to denote the time of birth, physical characteristics, birth order, and so on.

Cushitic Names

For Men:		For Women:	
Awaale	Samatar	Awrala	Magol
Bahdoon	Samakab	Haweeya	Ubah
Geedi	Waabberi	Hodan	Sagal

Arabic Names

For Men:		For Women:	
Abubakar	Omar	Aasha	Leyla
Abdullah	Muhammad	Basra	Mariam
Khalid	Hassan	Faadumo	Sufia

Names of Somali Clans

Members from different Somali clans will also have distinctive names. The following are some of the more common names and the clans they are affiliated with.

DAAROOD	ISAAQ	HAWIYE	DIR	RAHANWAYN
Yusuf	Habar Yoonis	Habar Gidir	Gadabursi	Sagal (9 clans)
Sade	Habar Awal	Abgaal	Iise	Siyed (8 clans)
Ciise	Habar Jaalo	Biyamaal		
Tanade	Iidagale	Hawaadle		
Kablalah		Murursade		
		Ujuuraan		